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Montpelier transportation center, Barre bridge get federal funds

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MONTPELIER — Dozens of scheduled Vermont road, rail and bridge projects got a cash boost Friday when the U.S. Senate approved a \$286.4 billion transportation bill.

Vermont is scheduled to receive more than \$1 billion from the appropriation over the next five years, an increase of about \$250 million over the last five-year bill.

These projects include Montpelier's transportation center, bridge repair money for Barre Town and funding for the Bennington bypass.

The bill, which already passed the House, was passed Friday by the Senate in a vote of 91-4. President Bush has said he will sign the bill.

Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., ranking member on the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, has been working on the transportation bill for several years. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt, and Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt, also worked for funding on some of the projects.

The transportation bill also includes environmental, historical preservation and public transit projects.

About \$6 million to mitigate stormwater runoff issues is coming to Vermont over the next five years, said Ken Connolly, staff director for the committee.

In addition, \$6.5 million will be spent on restoration of Vermont covered bridges.

The \$4 million that will be given to Montpelier in the bill will bring the total federal funding for a parking garage in the city to about \$5.5 million, said Jon Anderson, chairman of the committee working to develop a transit center near downtown.

The transit center is planned for the so-called Carr property near the Winooski River, where the city's temporary bus station is now.

The entire project, which will include the transit center, the new parking garage to replace parking spots lost in the development, a bike path and a bridge over the river, is expected to cost roughly \$10 million. The federal government has pledged \$7.5 million for the parking garage and an additional \$2 million for the transit center. About \$750,000 will come from city bonds and state money, Anderson said.

The project is probably a few years away, he said.

"We will proceed as soon as possible," Anderson said. And although he would like the transit center to be built immediately, the project is moving as fast as can be expected, he said.

"Anything we can do to make it a more pleasant experience makes it better for the people who are using public transit," Anderson said. A transit center can help keep Vermont Transit Co. changing where it picks up and drops off passengers to outside of town as well, he said.

Barre Town is slated to receive about \$2 million in federal funds for work to be done on Bridge Street as it crosses the Stevens Branch of the Winooski.

The bridge needs to be replaced and the street from there to Route 14 needs re-paving, said Barre Town Select Board Chairman Francis McFaun.

"It's something that has needed to be replaced for several years," he said. The curve in the road may also be removed, and the bridge itself slightly shifted, said McFaun.

He hopes that the federal money will be enough to accomplish the task, he said.

"We have a good shot at it," said McFaun, who added that federal, state and local government was working on the project.

"Sen. Jeffords deserves a lot of the credit," he said.

Cabot is scheduled to receive \$760,000 to rehabilitate the Saw Mill Road Bridge over the Winooski River as well.

In Bennington, \$20 million has been slated for the northern leg of the Bennington Bypass, ensuring that the project will go ahead soon, according to Town Manager Stuart Hurd.

"I think it is essential from our perspective that it be completed as soon as possible," he said.

The \$50 million west leg of the bypass was completed last year. But trucks traveling along the east-west corridor are still going through downtown Bennington, Hurd said.

Construction on the \$100 million northern leg of the project is scheduled to begin in 2007 and the \$50 million southern leg is slated for construction after that.

The southern leg should be the simplest of the three, but the northern leg alone will help mitigate traffic problems, such as trucks using residential streets, Hurd said.

"If this is going to be effective ... we need that northern leg to be completed," he said.

Dawn Terrill, the state's secretary of transportation, said money for deferred maintenance of the state's infrastructure is essential. She said she was happy to see funding come to a number of projects which she has visited since taking over the agency last fall.

"I would never have imagined that would be the position we would be in, but it is excellent," she said.

Vermont received a large amount of funding for earmarked projects mainly because Jeffords, who will retire after the 2006 election, has seniority on the committee drafting the bill, Connolly said.

Terrill said losing that influence in the Senate committee is a consideration for her agency.

"Everybody agrees that there may be substantial changes in how transportation projects get funding in the next transportation bill," she said.

Jeffords secured funding for a lot of projects in the state, but he also worked on developing a more equitable system for distribution of money that is not specifically earmarked, said Jeff Squires, who was until recently a staff member of the committee and worked closely with Jeffords.

"One of the things this bill does is maintain a better approach for how we spend transportation money," he said.

Vermont also did well in the overall formula for transportation spending, apart from money earmarked for certain projects.

Squires said Jeffords "deserves a lot of credit for not letting this backslide into a paving program." Instead, he said, the bill considers the wide range of impacts that transportation spending has on a community.

At the root of the transportation bill was more than a year of public hearings and testimony from states about how transportation money should be spent, Squires said.

Contact Louis Porter at louis.porter@rutlandherald.com.